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ABSTRACT

To be a marginal student is to experience a strained, difficult relationship with the school environment. It is crucial to understand marginality and to analyze its extent in today's schools. The more intractable problems of school learning are most effectively addressed at an early stage when the relationship between individual and school environment first becomes problematic. The reality of marginality is that nationwide one in four students drops out of school before graduation and nearly one in two students does not graduate in certain locations and among certain ethnic groups. The achievement of minority students still lags significantly behind that of white students, despite a decade of gains. Up to 40 percent of all junior high students and 60 percent of senior high students probably have trouble with academic reading materials. As many as two-thirds of the 17-year-olds still in school run the risk of becoming marginal due to inadequate writing skills. About one-third of all pupils achieve below grade level. One in 10 secondary students gets suspended from school. Nearly all high school students experiment with alcohol, more than one-half experiment with marijuana, and about 40 percent try other drugs. Understanding the perspective from the margins is important because it defines the problems of dropouts, low achievement, misbehavior, school avoidance, and drug use in a way that makes clear what changes in school might reduce these problems. (Author/ABL)

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The Reality of Marginality:

Current State of Affairs for Marginal Students

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ABSTRACT

The Reality of Marginality

Current State of Affairs for Marginal Students

by Ward J. Ghory and Robert C. Sinclair

To be marginal is to experience a strained, difficult relationship with the school environment. It is crucial to understand marginality, and to analyze its extent in today's schools, because the more intractable problems of school learning are most effectively addressed at an early stage, when the relationship between individual and school environment first becomes problematic. In this paper, we introduce the concept of marginality and estimate its extent.

The reality of marginality is that nationwide one in four students drop out of school before graduation and nearly one in two students do not graduate in certain locations and among certain ethnic groups. The achievement of minority students still lags significantly behind that of white students, despite a decade of gains. Up to 40 percent of all junior high students and 60 percent of senior high students probably have trouble with academic reading materials. As many as two-thirds of the seventeen-year-olds still in school run the risk of becoming marginal due to inadequate writing skills. About one-third of all pupils achieve below grade level. One in ten secondary students gets suspended from school. Nearly all high school students experiment with alcohol, more than half with marijuana, and about 40 percent with other drugs. This discouraging, unrelenting refrain of evidence symptomatic of students who become marginal dramatizes the necessity to learn more about how students reach the point where their relationship with the institutions designed for their learning becomes so ruptured. Perspective from the margins is important because it defines the problems of dropouts, low achievement, misbehavior, school avoidance and drug use in a way that makes clearer what changes in school might reduce these problems.

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The Reality of Marginality

Current State of Affairs for Marginal Students

To be marginal is to experience a strained, difficult relationship with the school environment.[1] It is crucial to understand marginality, and to analyze its extent in today's schools, because the more intractable problems of school learning are most effectively addressed at an early stage, when the relationship between individual and school environment first becomes problematic. Researchers do study the breaking points where an individual's relations with school are dramatically cut (dropouts, suspensions, failures, etc.). By considering marginality, we seek to turn the focus for reform back to a sharper look at the preliminary points where the strains in a student's interactions first appear at school. In this paper, we introduce the concept of marginality and estimate its extent. In remarks accompanying the presentation of this paper, we will describe briefly one project in which a partnership between parents and school advisers is used to teach marginal students how to relate more successfully at school.

IMAGES AND SOURCES OF MARGINALITY

Marginality--that is, disconnection between students and the conditions designed for learning--is a complex phenomenon arising from many sources and taking many forms. Students can be marginal in as many ways as they can experience unproductive dimensions of an educational environment. Take, for example, the analysis of an environment as containing physical, social, and intellectual conditions that influence learning. A young person can experience the physical dimensions of an environment as limiting conditions, as when an easily distractable student who needs private space for effective learning is assigned to an open-spaced classroom equipped with tables for

groups of children, or when an orthopedically handicapped child cannot take a specialized course because it is taught in a location without convenient access. Social conditions can also contribute to marginality for many students, as when a teacher who is less effective as a classroom manager must continually struggle to maintain control of a boisterous group. Intellectual conditions for learning can also be alienating--both for the gifted mathematics student who does not benefit from extended practice on straightforward problems assigned as independent seatwork and for the ill-prepared student in the next row who repeatedly practices the same procedural error without teacher intervention. As these examples suggest, marginality can be specific to a single situation or can be generalized to many aspects of an educational environment.

Various types of students become marginal, such as the learner not working up to potential, the understimulated exceptional learner, the one with a long history of academic failure or substandard achievement, and the one suddenly performing poorly despite previous success. Students can become marginal regardless of sex, race, family structure, or economic background, although these variables do influence the likelihood of problems with school. Marginal learners can include "children at risk" from low income or minority homes as well as youth from well-to-do families who face less-than-constructive circumstances in the school setting. For some, the experience of disconnection or marginality will be short-lived. Yet for many, the disconnection and resulting deficiencies will be a critical step in a downward path in which being marginal becomes a way of life in school and society.

Marginality in school has multiple sources, including student origens, present school and community conditions and even the students' anticipated futures. Pupils are a product of family and community environments that have

predisposed them to patterns of behavior that are more or less functional in school settings. As a secondary socialization agency, the school typically builds on, refines, or causes reconsideration and reorganization of patterns of thought and action developed in the family and community. Although a small percentage of young people suffer from severely damaged personalities or from serious physical or mental handicaps, it is estimated that less than five percent of young people enter school with relatively inalterable problems in learning.[2] Student origens by themselves are seen to account for only a small fraction of delinquent acts, and origins have a negligible impact on students' becoming marginal.[3]

Around the ages of eight to twelve, most young people begin to pay significantly more attention to their peers, to various media (recordings, movies, television, magazines), and to local community norms and beliefs. These aspects of life not controlled by school policies or procedures infiltrate the school environment as signficant influences on student behavior. The values and role models provided from outside school also significantly shape the interactions between students and the curriculum and instruction organized for learning. In recent years the school curriculum has been increasingly adjusted to counteract disfunctional messages sent to students by their peers and the community. Yet if there is a wide gap between the kinds of behavior rewarded in school and the norms and values of the homes and communities the school serves, more students are likely to become marginal in school.

Finally, those who view school as instrumental to achieving future goals tend to be less disengaged from school. On the other hand, those who cannot perceive the articulation between schoolwork and their future lives have less incentive to give their best effort to school tasks. When students sense that

future opportunities are restricted, their frustration with everyday tasks develops in part because their aspirations seem only dimly attainable.

The prime issue related to marginality in school is the responsiveness of the school environment to the variations among students that result from students' previous experiences. For this reason, we consider the school environment to be both a force that contributes to students' becoming marginal and a resource for correcting marginal behavior. Moreover, the school environment is alterable by educators. If schools do not provide a variety of settings and a relatively flexible approach to variations among their students, marginality is more likely to become a serious problem. For example, when schools place a premium on achieving fixed standards of performance under time constraints, some students inevitably will not find sufficient opportunities to learn. At the heart of making American public education more effective is the simple fact that too many young people have difficulties relating constructively and connecting productively to school settings.

THE EXTENT OF MARGINALITY

One revealing way to estimate the extent of marginal behavior is to conceive of a large group of students who have trouble relating to school settings and who act out their lack of success in inappropriate or unconstructive ways. From this group, various overlapping subgroups have been isolated for study. School researchers and government agencies document the extent of problem behaviors emerging from these major student groups, such as: students who drop out of school; students with low achievement; students who are suspended; students who avoid school through absenteeism, tardiness and class cutting; students who use drugs and alcohol. It is important to realize that statistics for the behaviors of these groups are maintained in

inconsistent and imcomplete ways. It is also important to understand that there are more marginal learners experiencing the preliminary stages of difficulty than are documented by research on the more extreme forms of difficulty at school. Yet we assume that statistics for dropouts, low achievement, suspension, school avoidance and substance abuse are useful for estimating the extent of marginality, since each behavior category reflects symptoms suggesting difficult and unprofitable relations with school.

Dropouts

Young people under eighteen years of age who are not enrolled in any educational program leading to a high school diploma or its equivalent are termed "dropouts." A recent compilation of school retention rates by the National Center for Educational Statistics indicates that about 72 percent of the young people entering the ninth grade in 1977 received a high school diploma in 1981.[4] Peng reports that the high school dropout rate for pupils entering the fifth grade has been approximately 25% since 1958.[5] Nearly one million young people withdraw from school each year--65 busloads of kids a day--because outside pressures and school-related difficulties make high school completion too problematic. As they face this decision to exit, these young people experience the most intense of marginal relations with schools.

The pressure to drop out varies by location, race and economic level. In six states (Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, and Tennessee) and in the District of Columbia, more than one in three students do not graduate with their classes.[6] In New York City the dropout rate is approximately 42%;[7] in Chicago, approximately 43%.[8] In the central Appalachian region the dropout rate is 38% and 30% in southern Appalachia.[9]

Among native Americans, Hispanics, and blacks, dropout rates are consistently higher than for whites and Asians. While black and Hispanic

youth are one and a half to two times more likely to drop out of school than white teenagers, this difference is primarily due to the greater poverty rates suffered by these minority groups. Non-poor black youth drop out at a rate (9.3%) that is only slightly higher than that of white youth (8.6%). Among all poor families, the proportion of blacks who fail to graduate from high school (24.6%) is lower than that of whites (27.1%).[10] However, the differential dropout rates among these cultural groups seriously affect their rate of participation in higher education. Since minority groups represent an increasing proportion of the youth population, some researchers conclude that if minority students continue to leave school at the current rate, the number of dropouts is likely to increase in the near future.[11]

To see these trends in context, it is useful to compare current dropout rates with those from previous time periods. In the 1900's for example, about 11% of all fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds were enrolled in high school and only 10% of those who made it to high school graduated. In the 1930s about one-third of the pupils completed the twelfth grade, and in the early 1950s slightly more than one-half of the eligible students graduated from high school.[12]

Many features of contemporary secondary school organization still derive from the early twentieth century when the school environment was designed to signal to many students that academic study, college preparation, and school-based vocational skills were not necessary or appropriate for them. Grading policies, grouping practices, instructional methods, and course content made it clear to some pupils that entry to work and family responsibilities without a high school diploma was not only permissible but even advisable. To a degree, teachers' attitudes reflected the same message. In other words, the marginal status of some students was at one time expected and accepted.

School was not the place for many students because young people had meaningful alternatives for employment and adult activities outside school. When we reconsider dropouts and other symptoms of marginality, our attention is directed to those features of the school environment that continue to communicate the invalid and misleading message that some students do not belong and cannot be successful in school.

Low Achievement and Underachievement

The academic achievement of marginal students is often of two sorts: low achievement (below-average performance compared to grade level or group norms) and underachievement (academic performance less than one's capability). Either of these conditions can be temporary (as when a child experiences a sudden dip in achievement), or lasting. Few school districts are eager to publish such data, so researchers can at best estimate the percentage of students who are marginal because of poor achievement.

Minimum competency tests related to high school graduation are helpful in estimating the extent of marginality in two ways. First, the results are useful for deriving general estimates of the percentages of children achieving below the minimum standards necessary for success at their grade level. Second, the test results highlight substantial discrepancies between the test performances of black and white classmates.[13] Again, these minimum measures will underestimate the extent of marginality.

Most evidence of the actual outcomes of competency testing remains fragmentary and unpublished. Nonetheless, by the fall of 1984, forty states had adopted provisions for competency testing, including nineteen states who are or will be using tests for granting or denying diplomas.[14] In the first

round of competency tests (1978-81), results reported from California, Florida, North Carolina and Virginia indicated that between 1% and 15% of the white students still in high school could be judged seriously marginal because they lacked minimal skills. Between 11% and 60% of the black students did not reach minimal mastery levels in reading or mathematics. State by state, a 10% to 20% discrepancy range between the performance of black and white students was evident.[15] In more recent testing (1982-85), results from New Mexico (Albuquerque), Texas, Florida and Maryland (Montgomery County) indicated a similar pattern.[16] The performance of students on initial competency tests is an imperfect indication of how much marginality is related to low achievement in part because test scores tend to improve substantially for many students upon retesting. However, if a student has been promoted for years in a school system but cannot attain academic standards considered minimal, the student must be considered seriously at risk of becoming marginal.

One meaningful national measure of student skills that goes beyond minimum standards comes from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which has sampled scores on reading tests in 1971, 1975, 1980, and 1984. Their reading scale of scores from 0 to 500 places students at rudimentary, basic, intermediate, adept, and advanced levels of performance. It has been estimated, using the Degrees of Reading Power scale, that for a high school graduate to be able to read with 90% comprehension the average urban newspaper, the average adult general interest magazine, or the typical document used in an entry level position in an insurance company, he or she would have to read at the adept level.[17]

Table 1 summarizes the findings from 1984. While virtually all of America's thirteen-and seventeen-year-old students had basic reading skills, approximately 36 percent of the nine-year-olds and 40 percent of the thirteen-

year-olds were likely to be having trouble with their school reading materials. By grade 11, 60 percent of the two and one-half million seventeen year old students could not readily comprehend academic track textbooks or relatively sophisticated newspapers and magazines. They were below the adept level needed for full participation in society. Moreover, only 5 percent of America's seventeen-year-olds still in school had the advanced skills needed to handle specialized or professional materials. On average, seventeen-year-old black and Hispanic students still read only about as well as thirteen-year-old white students. By NAEP measures, since 1970 overall pupil performance improved in reading at all age levels, with the performance of black and Hispanic students improving at a much greater rate than the performance of white students. Despite this encouraging finding, it is clear that inadequate reading skills are likely to be among the important reasons that as many as sixty percent of the students are at risk of becoming marginal.

Results from the NAEP's 1983-84 assessment of writing achievement provided a multi-faceted analysis of the writing skills of eleventh-grade students, summarized here in Table 2. A variety of writing tasks were assigned (informative, analytic, persuasive, narrative, descriptive). On all but the newspaper report (based on a list of facts about a haunted house) and the imaginative narrative (a ghost story), more than two-thirds of the papers were judged as marginal or worse. For example, only two out of ten students could consistently write an adequate persuasive letter.[18] While most seventeen year olds can write at a minimal level, it is sobering to conclude from the results of this national study that as many as two-thirds of the seventeen-year-olds still in school run the risk of becoming marginal due to inadequate writing skills.

Table 1
Percentage of Students At or Above Scale Points on the NAEP Reading Achievement Scale, 1984

Age	Categories				
	Rudimentary (150)	Basic (200)	Intermediate (250)	Adept (300)	Advanced (350)
9	94	64	18	1	0
13	100	94	60	11	0
17	100	99	84	39	5

Source: "Reading Performance Trends, 1971-1984: Their Significance." NAEProgram 4 (Princeton, NJ: National Assessment of Educational Progress, Fall 1985).

Table 2
NAEP's 1983-84 Writing Assessment Results for Grade 11 in Percent

Task	Non-Ratable	Unsatis-factory	Marginal	Satis-factory	Very Good	Marginal or Less
Informative newspaper report	1	12	27	55	5	39
Short analytic essay	1	14	61	22	2	75
Persuasive letter 1	2	8	69	19	2	77
letter 2	1	32	40	25	3	72
Imaginative narrative	2	3	42	48	5	45
Imaginative description	1	30	50	17	2	80

Source: Ina Mullis, "Writing Achievement and Instruction Results from the 1983-84 NAEP Writing Assessment." (Paper given at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, Philadelphia, 1985).

Unfortunately, the NAEP has not developed scales to categorize student achievement levels in mathematics, science, and political knowledge and attitudes. Instead, trends are reported in mean percentage scores that are not as useful for determinng how many pupilss are likely to be marginal due to low achievement.

Tests that measure students' mastery of grade-level standards are also being developed by states and school districts. In Pennsylvania, for example, 35% of the approximately 350,000 public school students in grades three, five, and eight who took a new statewide test in 1984 failed to pass the cut-off scores.[19] In New York City, Atlanta, Dade County, and Philadelphia, promotion to the next grade level is being tied to test scores and quantifiable criteria other than age. Officials there expect the percentage of students being retained in grades one to eight to double or triple when promotion policies based on academic standards go into effect.

It is no simple matter for school or state officials to administer criterion-referenced tests and expect near grade-level performance by students before their promotion to the next grade. According to the National Black Child Development Institute, 43 percent of black males aged fourteen to seventeen and 38 percent of black females in the same age group are currently not achieving on grade level.[20] While comparable statistics are not available, it is reasonable to suggest that achievement below grade level is a serious problem for large numbers of other ethnic and racial groups, and also for white students, particularly those coming from poor homes. Follow-up instructional programs that lead to a meaningful opportunity to gain needed skills would have to be implemented for over one-third of the pupils in this country if "grade level" performance were mandated.

Low achievement and underachievement are by no means restricted to students in the cities, to "disadvantaged" students, to students from economically poor homes and to students with previously deficient achievement. In American public schools, marginal behavior can emerge unexpectedly--for gifted students, for a student whose teacher was changed, for learners whose families become disrupted. It is difficult to predict that an individual will not become marginal. In a 1984 study of nonpromotion at grades nine and ten in the Cincinnati Public Schools , achievement scores, attendance data, previous failure record, suspensions, race, sex, socioeconomic status, and student self-report data were collected for 2,424 students, of whom 423 (17.5%) were subsequently not promoted to the next grade. Using a combination of all these factors, discriminant analysis accurately placed 97% of the students in the passing group. However, when applied to the failing students, the same set of variables and cut-off scores also predicted that 83% of them should have passed! In other words, the failing group looked very much like the passing group.[21]

Marginal standing is a concern even with highly able students, who are normally considered to be at the opposite extreme from those who are not being promoted. Estimates of under-achievement among the most able have ranged from 15 percent to 50 percent.[22] Lewis Terman's 150 "less successful" students included about one-quarter of his gifted subjects.[23] Jane Raph estimates that about one-half of the top 10 percent in IQ do not prepare themselves for the high level pursuits they are capable of performing.[24] A two year study of delinquency in suburban settings found that 18 percent of those who entered the juvenile justice system were intellectually gifted.[25]

Again we stress that marginal achievement is in a major way a function of the individual's relationship to learning conditions in classrooms and

schools. In some settings, students considered low achievers attend school regularly, try hard, cooperate in the classroom, and get decent grades and improved test scores because they are learning and progressing. Some students with high achievement test scores do not attend school regularly and are not motivated to complete course requirements; thus they do not achieve to capacity, or they fail. Conscientious parents monitor their children's learning situation in all their classes, since they realize that any student is vulnerable to being placed in settings where he or she cannot readily perform to full capacity without direct assistance and support.

The sober truth about marginal achievement is that over one third of the nation's pupils perform below "grade level." The majority of secondary students lack needed reading and writing skills. Incalculable numbers of children with previous grade-level or above-average achievement scores do not perform to their capability each year. As the results of the study Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at Risk suggest, marginal students are not a fringe population but are an ill-served majority of students.[26]

While the presence in school of low achieving marginal learners is frequently interpreted as a product of organizational failure, there is a sense in which low achievement and under-achievement are a product of the school organization itself. Grouping students in large groups of 25 to 35 for instruction will lead to uncorrected errors in learning for many. If a narrow range of instructional techniques and learning activities is emphasized, some learners who fit with these approaches will be systematically favored over others. If relatively inflexible school schedules are set up, there won't be time available for educators to collaborate to solve learning problems or for students to have extra opportunities to learn. When students are tracked by ability and provided different levels of curriculum and instruction, the gap

between the achievement of different groups will grow as students move through the grade levels. Analyzing achievement as a symptom of marginality forces the attention of educators back to the alterable aspects of the school environment.

Suspensions

The disciplinary tool of short-term suspension from school is designed to be used as a punishment for non=academic behavior that deviates dramatically from school norms. This behavior is often characteristic of seriously marginal students. Suspensions generally occur when a crisis is reached, usually after a series of related disciplinary incidents have occurred. As such, suspension rates provide a means to estimate the frequency of serious unconstructive conduct that is likely to be practiced by students who are at odds with the educational environment.

In 1972-73, the Office of Civil Rights conducted for the first time a national survey of school suspensions, collecting data from 50% of the total enrollment in American public schools and 90% of all minority students. They estimated that 8 percent of all secondary pupils and 1 percent of all elementary pupils were suspended that year.[27] Secondary minority students were found to be suspended in rates disproportionate to the number of minority children enrolled in school. For example, one in every eight black children were suspended, compared to one in every sixteen white children. These findings were corroborated by a Children's Defense Fund study and Southern Regional Conference study conducted during the same time period.[28]

More recent data indicate that the discriminating nature of suspensions persists and rates of suspension remain high. Unfortunately, shortly after the Reagan administration took office, the Office of Civil Rights ceased to perform certain analyses of the data and made only summaries of the survey

findings widely available to the public.[29] For example, analyses based on the 1980 Office of Civil Rights survey released in 1982 combined elementary and secondary suspension rates which resulted in lower overall figures than reported above. In 1980, 4.5% of white students were suspended at least once, 9.9% of black students, 4.9% of Hispanic students and 5.4 percent overall.[30]

Mean suspension rates can also mask the distribution across states and school districts. For example, In Ohio during 1980, overall suspension rates were higher than national rates: 5.1% of white students were suspended, 12.8% of black students, 6.3% of Hispanic students, and 6.1% overall. About 90% of these suspensions were at the secondary level. Further, in ten percent of Ohio's districts more than 9.5% of all students were suspended.[31] In short, marginality related to student suspensions varied across school districts and across racial and cultural groups.

Those who analyze the reasons for suspension tend to agree that treatment of different cultural groups is equal in cases of serious misconduct. But most suspensions are not the result of serious offenses. Suspended students usually are not violent nor do they pose a serious threat to persons or property. Put plainly, students (especially minority ones) are more likely to be suspended because of the way they react when they develop a problem with a teacher or authority figure. Rates of suspension vary most by race in cases depending upon an educator's judgment and use of the referral process, such as when the violation is unclear (defiance of authority, disrespectful conduct), when the gravity of the misbehavior can be questioned (play fighting), or when the exclusion may depend upon a teacher's or an administrator's tolerance level (chronic tardiness, truancy).[32] For example, in one study most of the discipline problems involving black males stemmed from "friction offenses"--conflicts caused by differences in values, style, and culture, including ways

of speaking, acting or showing respect.[33] For this reason, overall rates of suspension tend to increase in newly desegregated situations.[34]

The evidence of gender discrimination is also clear-cut. The Office of Civil Rights only recently began collecting information about the gender of suspended students. In 1980, 8 percent of all elementary and secondary school male students were suspended, compared to 3.8 percent of female students. As a case in point, in the Cleveland Public Schools in 1981-82, the suspension rate for black males was 45%; other males, 28%; black females, 25%; other females, 14%.[35] (In these percentages, students who have been suspended more than once are also counted more than once, thus inflating the absolute number of students reported as being suspended.)

Neither the Office of Civil Rights nor any state governmental agency has collected information regarding school suspension and social class. A 1974 Children's Defense Fund study, however, found that children were more likely to be suspended if their families wer poor.[36] This raises the question of whether minority suspensions may be less of a race than a poverty problem. More research is needed on this topic.

Indicators nationally show that the use of student suspension as a disciplinary tool is increasing. For example, in Illinois in 1970, 5.6% of the public high school population was suspended at least once; by 1980 the rate had risen to 14.4%.[37] In Cleveland, the suspension rate doubled between 1971 and 1981. In Philadelphia, suspension rates increased during the same time period.[38]

Just as suspension has gradually replaced corporal punishment as the most common disciplinary measure, so now "alternatives to suspension"--like in-school suspension rooms, parents shadowing students for a day, Saturday classes, after-school counseling, work study and alternative schools--are now

increasingly being considered. These measures mark a more enlightened approach to marginal behavior that attempts to keep open opportunities for both academic and personal/social learning. The question remains whether these alternatives will be seen as meaningful by students and educators, and whether they will influece students behavior in the desired way. Our estimate is that at least one in ten secondary students overall, and one in five black students, currently reaches a point of such difficulty in relating to the school environment that he or she is temporarily suspended. Again, the time to intervene to reduce suspensions is before a situation has developed to the crisis point. Marginality related to behavior problems has to be treated earlier, such as when students first cut class or skip school.

School Avoidance

School avoidance (truancy, class cutting, excessive tardiness) is also difficult to estimate reliably. Data collected by school districts and government agencies are not standardized and are difficult to retrieve. Nevertheless, the human tendency to avoid problematic and frustrating situations makes school avoidance a useful symptom of marginal student behavior. Moreover, the amount of avoidance gives a sense of the extent of marginal conduct.

Absenteeism for unacceptable reasons is termed "truancy." The exact level of absenteeism that indicates a need for concern is not well defined. One rule of thumb is that a group absence rate of about 5 percent can be expected under normal conditions and for legitimate reasons.[39]

In a study of student attendance in Ohio public schools, average attendance rates remained relatively stable between 1971 and 1983. For the 1982-83 school year, aggregate elementary school attendance in Ohio was 94.9%; for junior high schools, 92.3%; and for high schools, 91.5%. At the

elementary school level, 64% of the districts met the expected absence rate of five percent. At the junior high school level, 32% of the districts met the criterion, while at the high school level only 12.5% of the districts had less than five percent absence. Another way to say this is that one third of the school districts in Ohio reported attendance problems at the elementary level and nearly ninety percent of the districts had attendance problems at the secondary level.[40]

Because absence from school is often linked to failure in school, this symptom of marginal status is an immediate concern. The long-term consequences of truancy are also serious. For example, a review of the literature on truancy indicated it was the childhood symptom that most reliably predicted an elevated rate of adult deviant behavior.[41] Particularly for secondary students, the chronic truant is clearly a marginal person who is acting to avoid experiencing an unproductive relationship with school.

The path to truancy often starts with class cutting. To see avoiding school from the perspective of the margins, it is important to analyze what classes students cut. In Jane Stallings' study of secondary reading classrooms, students were selective not so much over teacher personality but more about classroom practice. In classes with high absence, students were assigned a great deal of written seatwork and independent silent reading. Partly as a result of assigning work correlated with high off-task behavior, teachers in the classes students cut spent proportionately more time on discipline and on classroom management than in other reading classes. Classes that were better attended were characterized by a much more interactive instructional program in which students read and recited aloud, then engaged in dialogue or oral drill and practice with the teacher. These findings suggest that class cutting is in part a function of the classroom learning

enviornment, not simply the problem of a wayward child. Learning environments with a lot of independent seat work are likely to push more students across the margins and out of class.[42]

The school's response to avoidance behavior can compound the problem. For example, in one survey of 1,500 students and 225 teachers in six high schools, most students (62.5%) reported they were not caught for class cutting. Of those who were caught, about half (57.4%) reported receiving a "meaningful" punishment for the offenses (detention, parent conference, suspension), while the rest (42.6%) received mild or no punishment (incident ignored, verbal reprimand, warning).[43] Because the odds aren't too bad that a class cutter will be caught or meaningfully punished, class cutting is a good example of how marginality is a problem in the interaction between the school environment and the learner.

In many schools, there is lack of agreement about what the rules ought to be, leaving individual teachers and administrators to establish their own interpretations of school codes and expectations. This disparity in behavioral standards across classrooms and schools is widely documented.[44] Indeed, a significant percentage of teachers apparently employ a "sliding rule" system, in which rules are not spelled out clearly from the start but are made up in response to emerging events.

Further, when a rule is broken there is lack of agreement about what should be done with the rule breaker, leaving it up to the individual teacher to decide whether or not to seek punishment of the student. The treatment of students differs most at this stage. The level of concern a teacher conveys to an administrator may affect the way a student is eventually treated. Here we find that minority students and students from poorer homes are disproportionately sent to the principal's office for punishment. For

example, teachers can misread as aggressive or threatening black male posture, dress and speech intended to convey virility or self-control. When sent to the office for "doing nothing," these students feel resentful because they were "singled out," and they start to feel more marginal to that classroom as a result of a misunderstanding.

With little agreement on rules and consequences for breaking the rules, the probability that students will be evaluated and responded to differently for the same type of behavior increases. Thus, it takes more than breaking a rule to become marginal. Marginal status is an ascribed status in school. Students do not automatically attain marginal status when they commit certain kinds of unacceptable acts. A student becomes marginal when authority figures determine that the student's behavior deserves sanctions that limit opportunities for continued full involvement on the same terms as other students. While some students respond by acting to remove this stigma, many other come to integrate this negative view into their perceptions of themselves. Sometimes they act to perpetuate or live up to this emerging identity. If an observer were to spend a few days in a school administrator's office, it would become clear that certain students are seriously marginal because they are locked into a pattern of repeated disciplinary or academic difficulties related to school avoidance. Analysis of avoidance clearly shows the influence of school environment on the behavior of marginal students. One way to improve attendance and to reduce class cutting is to alter patterns of instruction encouraging passive student behavior. Another way is to help teachers understand student behavior so they can be more consistent and fair with discipline.

Drug Use

Illicit drug use, another possible symptom of marginal status, is for many students a symbol of their independence from home, school and society. Drugs are often used by marginal students both to relieve the tension produced by academic difficulty and to gain acceptance into student subcultures that sanction deviant behavior. Students' troubles in school that arise from their using drugs provide another example of the way marginal status can be temporary (experimentation or selective use) or perhaps more lasting (psychological dependence, physical addiction). The progressive nature of chemical dependency also illustrates the way some marginal students go through stages of increasing intensity of marginality, leading to disconnection from the school setting.

It is now more widely understood that chemical dependency is a progressive disease that causes the user to worsen physically, spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically. The user goes through four stages as this progresive disease develops: 1) learning about the drug-induced mood swing; 2) seeking the mood swing; 3) becoming preoccupied with the mood swing; 4) using chemicals to feel normal.[45]

At stage 1 the experimenter learns that chemicals can provide temporary mood swings in the euphoric direction. Through practice, the experimenter learns to control the degree of the mood swing by regulating his or her intake of the chemical. The experimenter can discontinue use or can progress to regular use.

At stage 2 the chemical user seeks the mood swing in social or recreational situations, using the chemical at "acceptable" times and places. The user continues to control the intensity and outcome of chemical experiences and may occasionally suffer physical pain (hangover) from an overuse of the chemical, but little emotional pain (guilt). Most users stay

in the second ,or social, phase.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse found in its annual survey of drug use among high school seniors that the majority of high school seniors in the class of 1983 had reached the stages of experimental and social drug use. Nearly all young people (93%) had tried alcohol by the end of their senior year, and the great majority (69%) had used it in the prior month. At least 57% of seniors had experimented with marijuana at some time, while 27% reported using it in the prior month. Fully 40% of the 1983 seniors reported having used illicit drugs other than marijuana and alcohol (such as amphetamines, cocaine, hallucinogens, and inhalants).

The risk of serious marginal behavior arises when a user advances to the third stage of chemical use, becoming a preoccupied user. At this stage, "getting high" becomes a priority in the person's life. Due to this preoccupation, behavior worsens; a person's clothing, appearnace, and language openly identify the individual as a "druggie." Straight friends are dropped. The preoccupied user begins to experience recurring loss of control over chemical use; he or she may come high to class, skip school, or develop increased but gradually unpredictable tolerance to the chemical. The disease can be the source of the marginal behavior in school, but the disease becomes a lifestyle that persists due to ineffective and dissatisfying relations between the user and his or her school and community environments. At this stage, negative feelings about the self are typically not identified and therefore are not solved, resulting in growing chronic emotional stress. A delusional memory system prevents the user from acknowledging the severity of his or her own condition. Without full awareness, the preoccupied user finds his or her whole life deteriorating.

At stage 4 a user must take chemicals to feel normal. Blackouts occur more frequently and physical addiction can occur. Paranoid thinking appears. Guilt, remorse, shame, and anxiety are chronically present. The user's self-worth erodes, and suicidal thoughts become frequent. The risk of marginal behavior in school is greatest for young people at stage 3 or 4 of chemical dependency.

In the survey of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, daily drinking and daily marijuana use were each estimated at 5.5% (one in eighteen students). Binge drinking (at least five or more drinks in a row on at least one occasion in the prior two weeks) was estimated at 43% of all students (two of five students). One in six students (17%) indicated that they had smoked marijuana daily or almost daily in the previous one month period. The percentages of students using other drugs in the prior month period was 9% for amphetamine use, 6.5% for cocaine use, and 3.8% for hallucinogen use.[47]

The danger of marginality in school related to illicit drug and alcohol use is present for students in all ranges of academic ability.[48] Initial experimentation with alcohol and marijuana occurs well before tenth grade for most students.[49] School might be the place where drugs are purchased, where drug exploits are recounted, where drug life-styles are reinforced. Data on drug use indicate the dramatic peril chemical dependency poses for the physical, emotional, and academic adjustment of young people. Experimenters and social users may or may not be marginal in school, but preoccupied and dependent users usually are at high risk of becoming marginal. Chemical dependency is a progressive disease, and the majority of high school seniors have entered its preliminary stages. Thus, data on drug use confirm the sobering fact that most secondary students are at risk of developing unforeseen problems in relating to school.

Summary

The reality of marginality, then, is that nationwide one in four students drop out of school before graduation and nearly one in two students do not graduate in certain locations and among certain ethnic groups. The achievement of minority students still lags significantly behind that of white students, despite a decade of gains. Up to 40 percent of all junior high students and 60 percent of senior high students probably have trouble with academic reading materials. As many as two-thirds of the seventeen-year-olds still in school run the risk of becoming marginal due to inadequate writing skills. About one-third of all pupils achieve below grade level. One in ten secondary students gets suspended from school. As many as one third of elementary and ninety percent of secondary school districts (in one state studied) had attendance problems. Nearly all high school students experiment with alcohol, more than half with marijuana, and about forty percent with other drugs. One in six seniors in the class of 1983 smoked marijuana continually for at least a month some time during high school. No doubt, these varied groups and different categories overlap in many ways. Nevertheless, this discouraging, unrelenting refrain of evidence symptomatic of students who become marginal dramatizes the necessity to learn more about how students reach the point where their relationship with the institutions designed for their learning becomes so ruptured.

We have selected the term "marginal" in order to move away from the negative and divisive connotations connected with "dropout," "failure," "truant," and with most other labels used to describe young people who have difficult relations with school. Rather than providing a means to separate individuals and acts neatly into two categories--deviant and normal--the shift in word choice highlights the fact that the marginality of an act or

individual is always relative and changeable, a matter of degree. In fact, the degree of marginality depends not only upon the characteristics of the actor or action, but even more upon the way in which the person or behavior is viewed and treated. The term "marginal" helps us remember that problematic relationships result from two-sided interactions between an individual and an environment.

Marginal describes a contingent, shifting relationship between a learner and a school environment. The term is most usefully viewed as a "sensitizing" concept, heightening critical awareness of hitherto overlooked dimensions of the problems students are having in their learning.[50] It highlights the necessity of reshaping environments to promote constructive behavior. It implies that learners behave in a certain way in part because they have been treated in certain ways. In short, the use of the term "marginal" to explain student learning shifts the perspective from deeply seated problems rooted in individuals to problematic relationships between individuals and school environments. Perspective from the margins is important because it defines the problems of drop outs, low achievement, misbehavior, school avoidance and drug use in a way that makes clearer what changes in school might reduce these problems.

FOOTNOTES

1. The technical term "marginal" was coined by an anthropologist to describe the dilemma of individuals whose parents belonged to two different tribes. Although involved intimately in the life of both groups, these "marginal men" were devalued by group authorities and were visibly uncomfortable in many group settings. See Robert E. Park, "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," American Journal of Sociology 33 (May 1928): 892.

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